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Not *That* Kind of Adult Toy:

A Post-Adolescent Predilection for Plastic Playthings

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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ABSTRACT

Not *That* Kind of Adult Toy: A Post-Adolescent Predilection for Plastic Playthings

by

Kristen Nicole Bryant

This project is an exploratory study of the practice of toy collecting by adults. It examines the way they conceptualize their use of toys, what attracts them to these objects, the organization of communities of toy collectors, how they use the toys, and ultimately, what the toys provide for them. Using first-hand accounts collected at two pop culture conventions, information gathered from fan websites, respondent accounts featured in several recent documentaries, and panel presentations at three separate conventions, this study seeks to complicate the expectations of who toy consumers are (they're not just children), as well as demonstrate the way these fans combine both adult and childlike aspects of play into their activities. While the conception of the adult toy enthusiast is taking hold in popular culture, adult toy fans must still contest with a characterization of their hobby as odd and immature. To combat this tension and provide rationalization for their interest, toy enthusiasts employ a number of strategies involving the use of legitimizing language and activities. Ultimately, the following demonstrates that adult and child toy play do not encompass discrete categories, rather existing on a continuum of play throughout the life course.

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Oh, they think it's crazy. Yeah, no, nobody gets that (Fred).

If I see a nice figure of a character that I absolutely love or adore, I'm gonna own it at some point or another (Edwin).

We have one bedroom that's just Transformers. Nothing else.... Shelves in the center, shelves all the way around the walls, shelves in the closet. Everywhere (Greg).

And then you feel, y'know... bigger (Derrick).

NBC News reported in October 2014 that, “The children’s emporium Toys 'R Us is pulling a line of action figures based on characters from the ultra-violent cable series ‘Breaking Bad’ after complaints that the toys glamorized the murderous drug trade featured on the show. The figures included high-school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin Walter White and his sidekick delinquent Jesse Pinkman. The dolls came with toy accessories that included a detachable bag of cash and a bag of methamphetamine.” Initially, the retailer defended the toys, pointing to the fact that “the product packaging clearly notes that the items are intended for ages 15 and up” and “are located in the adult action figure area of our stores” (Gittens 2014). Toys R Us has an “adult action figure area”? They certainly do. *Breaking Bad* was just among the most recent (and most controversial), joining figures from other adult television shows and movies (including *Game of Thrones*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Taxi Driver* – all carrying a “Mature” or “Restricted” rating, suggesting appropriate audiences of 17 or older). When retailer giant Toys R Us carries toys aimed exclusively at adult audiences (and indeed, sets aside a dedicated aisle for them), it is clear that the industry has taken notice of an affinity for plastic playthings by the adult set.

However, as the article suggests, this new phenomenon hasn't insinuated itself without friction. It seems simple enough: Toys R Us is a store that carries toys, and *Breaking Bad* action figures are toys. The complication arises because in addition to carrying toys, Toys R Us is a store devoted to a certain age category – one that does not include adults shopping for themselves. Certainly, Toys R Us attempted to mitigate this conflict with the introduction of an “adult action figure area,” but this apparently has done little to ease the transgression of the social structures involved (that is, of the store itself, and the practices of the people who use it). There is an expectation of who goes to Toys R Us, and why they go there, and adults buying toys for themselves do not fit this existing structure. As one ‘Brony’ (adult [male] fan of *My Little Pony*) notes:

Just me standing in this aisle to begin with, there might be a mom and her daughter walking by and look down the aisle and see an older guy looking through pony toys. It's programmed in their mind to jump to the worst case scenario, which might be, you know, 'Oh he's a pedophile, or he's a big ol' man child, or something's wrong with him' (Stephen Carver, aka "SaberSpark," in *A Brony Tale*, 2014).

The fact that there isn't yet a place in the existing structure (here, a *toy* store) for an economy of toys for adults represents a lag behind the massive change taking place in the understanding of what constitutes an “adult toy” (which often brings to mind a very different kind of product entirely – one traditionally associated with a very narrow realm of human experience – and one not encompassing action figures, die cast cars, or plastic bricks). This raises the questions: How is it that adults come to play with toys? What specifically do they

do with them? And how does this range of activities reflect a balance of adult and child activity?

Toys are the playthings of children. Thus, when adults are collecting or simply appreciating them, it marks a tension – unique among other objects adults may choose to collect. Evidence of an orientation to this as such appears in the way toy collectors selectively display their collections (who is allowed to see them, in what context, etc.), as well as in the search for ways to use these items in an acceptable manner. One such way to do so involves invoking a *professional relationship* to the items. Bloggers, toy reviewers, and those who maintain fan sites are among just a few of such outlets, and draw in millions of fans daily. Third-party or toy resellers likewise are able to engage with these objects in a fully-sanctioned manner (one which provides a [very “adult”] financial relationship). Alternately, toy enthusiasts may interact with toys *via children* in their lives. Children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and others can play mediating roles validating the adult use of child-targeted items. Or, their engagements may fall into a third category: *collecting*.

The following research will examine this third practice, illustrating the ways in which collecting toys can provide a basis for the formation of their possessors’ identities, foster relationships with loved ones (and other toy fans), and inspire creativity and play. Toy collecting by adults complicates assumptions of who consumes toys (as the above anecdotes attest). While a relatively new phenomenon, however, it has quickly become a widely recognizable activity, with examples of adult toy collectors appearing in mainstream media (albeit consistently characterizing subjects as falling into the trope of “man child” (tvtropes.org)): characters like Andy from *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), Jeff from *Grandma’s Boy* (2006), Shawn Spencer from *Psych* (2006), Sheldon from *The Big Bang*

Theory (2007), Morgan Grimes from *Chuck* (2007), Phil from *Modern Family* (2009), Andy from *Parks and Recreation* (2009), Detective Jake Peralta from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013), Peter Quill from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and Pee-Wee Herman are recognizable adult toy enthusiasts. (These characterizations demonstrate the mainstream nature of the practice, as it wouldn't successfully elicit laughter or other responses from audiences if viewers didn't already have a general conception of what this activity looks like – or at least, what they expect it to look like.) Further, this practice complicates a life course model of human development about how adults and children play differently.

Literature Review

Toys are “cultural objects,” in that they carry meaning and significance beyond their mere material utility (Griswold 2013:22) that inspire creativity and play. This status and these meanings are not built into the objects themselves, but are created only when we consider the objects in terms of their “story,” that is, the meanings created through social interaction with cultural objects in context (Griswold 2013:11). In order to shed sociological light on how these meanings are created, I employ Gary Fine’s (2010) “micro- or meso-level” approach to the study of culture. Fine states that “culture should be conceptualized as a set of actions, material objects, and forms of discourse held and used by groups of individuals” (213). In other words, by examining the individual, micro-level use of toys as cultural objects, and at the meso-level, how that usage facilitates engagement with other toy enthusiasts, I will be able to demonstrate that toys offer a tangible framework around which to construct and demonstrate one’s identity, nurture relationships, take part in creative expression, and otherwise engage in emotional connections.

Essential to an understanding of the relationship of fans to the toys they hold dear is an examination of where they are situated in the processes of production and consumption. Like any other cultural object, toys do not exist in a vacuum, but as a part of the “culture industry system,” through which objects are produced, marketed, distributed, received, and interpreted (Hirsch 1972). The production end of the life of toys is encapsulated in those companies manufacturing them, whereas marketing, though also mainly executed by these corporations, additionally rests largely in the hands of fans. Those aforementioned professionally-involved consumers write or film reviews, notify other fans of news of upcoming releases (including live reporting from conventions), offer extensive product

galleries, and present other coverage that – intentional or otherwise – serves to whet the appetites of (or occasionally deter) fans. For our purposes, the key point of the production, market, and distribution aspects of the process is that “the ultimate success of a cultural object depends on its listeners, viewers, audiences, or consumers – in other words, on the cultural recipients who make their own meanings from it. For although the meaning of a cultural object may be initially suggested by the intentions or period eye of its creators, the receivers of culture *have the last word*” (Griswold 2013:83, emphasis mine).

This brings us to the [arguably] final stage in the culture industry system, and easily the most vital and vibrant to our discussion: reception (into which we will also include the inseparable process of interpretation). Here, consumers of toys exercise agency in their consumption of these objects, from deciding what and how to buy, to what they will do with the objects once acquired. We start with the logical first step, whereupon we ask: What is it that attracts audiences to toys to begin with?

In their discussion of the aesthetic elements of television, Bielby and Harrington (2008) describe “the unique features of series that industry personnel identify as enabling resonance with local audiences. It is well known that audiences derive pleasures and construct meanings through aesthetic valuation of television’s attributes, and they form appraisals about the worthiness of programs as entertainment on the basis of prior experience” (111). For toys, features such as a figure’s physical appearance, the extent of its poseability, and even its scent are important considerations in evaluating its worthiness. Central to this experiential basis of toys’ appeal is their root in the user’s own past (childhood), reflecting an interplay with affect, as is examined later.

Henry Jenkins (2007) discusses the importance in seemingly banal categories of aesthetic enjoyment by audiences: “Cinema and other popular arts were to be celebrated...because they were so deeply imbedded in everyday life, because they were democratic arts embraced by average citizens” (22-23). Toys occupy space on people’s desks at work, clip onto car keys, and inhabit entire dedicated rooms – clearly demonstrating their ubiquity and embedded nature in the lives of collector and casual consumer alike. In discussing the integration of soap operas into viewers’ everyday lives, Harrington & Bielby (1995) point to the fact that, “Part of the formula of serials – and a source of intense viewer pleasure – is that they offer daily involvement with fictional characters and communities. Through weeks, months, and years of watching daytime television, viewers come to feel that they know characters intimately” (125). In this same manner, an adult toy fan’s long (often dating back to childhood) and ever-present relationship with a toy can itself be a source of affective enjoyment.

In addition to being everywhere, these objects are extremely accessible. A consumer may or may not be familiar with the stories of *Spider-Man*, but there is no requisite literary/linguistic skill or media access (TV, comic, film, book, or otherwise) for enjoying a Spider-Man toy for what it is, in its physical embodiment – thus contributing to the place of toys among other such “democratic arts.” But it is not just about what draws audiences to these objects, but what they do with them once in their possession. As Jenkins continues:

...they captured the vitality of contemporary urban experience. They took the very machinery of the industrial age, which many felt to be dehumanizing, and found within it the resources for expressing individual visions, for reasserting basic human

needs, desires, and fantasies. And these new forms were still open to experimentation and discovery. They were, in Seldes's words, 'lively arts' ... (23).

By surrounding themselves with toys, fans are indeed “expressing individual visions,” and as we will see later, “experimentation and discovery” are likewise applied to toys by those who enjoy them.

In their aesthetic appreciation of these widely accessible objects, audiences develop insider communities organized around toys, complete with specialized language, which may be more or less accessible to other fans of the same franchise or the same category of toy. Brian Sutton-Smith (1986) found this to be the case in toy use among children: “Children who play together for any length of time develop their own private systems of communication and become increasingly unintelligible to outsiders. They develop their own *community of fantasy and play* and can easily signal to each other in ways with which others are not familiar” (250-251; emphasis in original). The same rules apply to adult toy fans that connect with one another via online communities (forums, boards, fan sites) or the occasional real-life encounter (sparked by visual markers like t-shirts emblazoned with affiliated insignia, or at conventions or in other specialized situations and spaces), employing specialized language and shorthand. Indeed, Jenkins found this insider knowledge (at least as far as the expectations of the objects, themselves) to be a requirement for full appreciation of the ways an object “builds upon and breaks with existing formulas” (3) – and how that may color a fan’s interest in a given toy.

With this specialized knowledge in hand, and membership in a potentially significant [online] community, what do audiences do with these cherished objects? The short answer is:

whatever they want. Audiences possess tremendous agency in the ways they enlist the use of cultural objects in their lives (Jenkins 2007; Sutton-Smith 1986; Griswold 2013; Becker 1982). In his examination of the consumption of a kids' television program by young children, Jenkins notes:

It also allowed me to examine not simply how individual children reacted to program content but how those responses were used in their interaction with their social peers, how they provided content for play, jokes, and conversations, and how television meanings were integrated back into lived experience (162).

Donald Winnicott's (1971) insight into play (that it isn't just important for kids) is here a meaningful consideration. Toys fill these same mediating roles in adult lives, as well, shaping what online boards, forums, and sites adults visit (and as a by-product, with what people they engage [in these communities]), which characters and franchises they employ in the use of jokes, memes, and other social devices, and where these objects (and their stories) fit into the user's lived experience. Harrington and Bielby (1995) further find this deployment of agency a notable factor in fans' experiences of enjoyment: "One opens a novel (or turns on a soap or plays Dungeons and Dragons) because one *chooses* to, and the time spent playing in fictional worlds is subject to one's own will. . . . The pleasure resides in the conscious decision to bracket the real and enter the fictional" (131, 132, emphasis in original).

WHAT IS ADULT PLAY?

One distinction important to point out, however, is that whereas Jenkins notes that "For young children, watching television lacks the textual imperatives that confront adults" (163), we see that adult toy audiences often employ textual imperatives in their discussions of toys. This frequently includes assertions of the rationale for what and why they collect.

Indeed, this echoes Jenkins's discussion of Bruno Bettelheim's (1987) examination of the sharp contrast between children's play and adult games: "Children recognize early on that play is an opportunity for pure enjoyment, whereas games may involve considerable stress" (Jenkins 2007:163). Jenkins adds (of his own work):

Over time, as the reality principle comes to restrain the pleasure principle, the 'pure' enjoyment of childhood play becomes a kind of 'guilty pleasure' that must be rationalized through the guise of some more purposeful or goal-centered activity (166).

Here, toy audiences may invoke legitimizing language and activities, discussing and engaging in collecting, customization, diorama-building, photo-novel production, and other such 'legitimate' adult activities that suggest purposive, clearly defined usage (beyond eliciting joy, that is). Both 'adult play' and 'kid play' have one important feature in common, however: audience agency. As Sutton-Smith found in his examination of the use of toys by children, "We have made the case that despite the apparent hegemony of toys in much of today's world, a real case can also be made that usually the child players control the toys rather than the other way around. This is what we have meant by the toys as agency. They are controlled rather than controlling" (205) and that "[for] children it is their motivated action with these symbolic vehicles (cars and dolls), rather than the things themselves, which constitutes the nature of play" (250-251). As I reveal, what attracts adult toy audiences to the toy in the first place may be the properties of the objects, themselves – whether in form (such as detailed sculpts, clean paint applications, extensive articulation) or franchise (a favorite character or universe) – but it is for adults likewise their "motivated action" with these objects that provides them pleasure. This of course does not occur in a vacuum; a toy fan's

experiences, environment, needs, interests, and more play into their particular enactments of interaction with a toy.

Regarding this freedom of interpretation of cultural objects, Griswold presents two theoretically competing views – one, that meaning-making lies with people, and objects must bend to their interpretation; and two (the opposite): that meanings are embodied in the objects themselves, and that people are constrained by these inherent qualities (89). Finding a reasonable middle ground, Hans Robert Jauss (1982) describes what he calls “horizons of expectations”; here, audiences are likewise not “empty buckets” waiting to be filled, but instead, our previous experiences shape the meanings we apply to our activities/consumption. Refining the picture further, John Fiske (1989) presents a ‘supermarket analogy,’ whereby shoppers (audiences) may access the same raw ingredients (objects) from among the same places and in the same ways, but what they do with these products once they get home – what recipes (social scripts) they use, what seasonings and additional ingredients (objects, practices) they pull from their own pantries – varies widely.

In addition to these differences between consumers (Jauss’s ‘shoppers’), are the differences that occur within consumers – over time, that is. What adults do with toys doesn’t just encompass a singular, static activity, as Jenkins (2007) points out:

Media scholars draw an important distinction between mass culture and popular culture. Mass culture is mass-produced for a mass audience. Popular culture is what happens to those cultural artifacts at the site of consumption, as we draw upon them as resources in our everyday life. Many scholars have focused on how the same mass-produced artifacts generate different meanings

for different consumers. Less has been said about the ways our relationships to those artifacts change over time, and the ways that what they mean to us shifts at different moments in our lives (65, emphasis mine).

Describing the over-time change in his own consumption of comics, Jenkins says, “The comics of our childhood are impossible to recover. Even if you hold onto your comics, the stories on the page are not the same ones you remember, because our memories are so colored by the contexts within which we encountered them, and especially by the ways we reworked them in our imagination and our backyard play” (74). Again, it is through use by the consumer that these cultural objects take on their embodied meanings – demonstrated here in the fact that the same objects, consumed by the same individual, do not necessarily maintain the same meanings. Were it the objects themselves that possessed inherent meaning, these interactions would remain more consistent over time, rather than being so susceptible to contexts and consumptive practices.

In discussing his relationship with comics over the course of his life, Jenkins describes a time around middle school when he more or less moved away from comics in terms of his active engagement with them, though a subsurface relationship to them arguably remained. Similar rhetoric appears throughout toy fandom, particularly among “AFOLs” (“Adult Fans of Lego”), as one’s “Dark Ages” – a time, often beginning around middle school, during which the fan moves away from the objects, before being reunited with them later in life – often in college, or upon their own children’s introduction to the particular object, or upon discovering the online presence of others with like-interests. Following these so-called “Dark Ages,” many fans, Jenkins says, “spend their entire lives – and much of their incomes” (2007:72) attempting to recover pieces that may have been casually or thoughtfully

discarded by themselves or their parents. Indeed, eBay and other auction or classifieds websites – including specialty sites catering to specific toys, such as Lego bricks or Transformers figures have provided an unprecedented resource to collectors.¹ The point here, of course, is that we can't just have the same “comics of our childhood” – not because the objects have changed, but because we have changed.

This project is an exploratory study of the practice of toy collecting by adults. It examines the way they conceptualize their use of toys, what attracts them to these objects, the organization of communities of toy collectors, how they use the toys, and ultimately, what the toys provide for them. Using first-hand accounts collected at two pop culture conventions, information gathered from fan websites, respondent accounts featured in several recent documentaries, and panel presentations at three separate conventions, this study seeks to complicate the expectations of who toy consumers are (clearly, not just children), as well as demonstrate the way these fans combine both adult and childlike aspects of play into their activities.

Methods

Evidence for the following comes from interviews conducted with adult attendees at two fan conventions in Southern California: San Diego Comic-Con International and BotCon. San Diego Comic-Con International is a major pop culture convention that originated forty-two years ago with a focus on comic books, expanding and evolving over the years to include television, film, video games, toys, art, and other media. The convention is held annually at

¹ Flea markets and garage sales are still an option for obtaining out-of-production toys – and can offer the best deals – but in addition to buyers flocking to cyberspace, sellers have, as well, leaving most of the toy transactions to occur via the web.

the San Diego Convention Center, drawing in approximately 130,000 attendees each July. BotCon, a Hasbro-sponsored convention devoted to the company's wildly-popular Transformers toys (and assorted related media) is much smaller by comparison, and changes venue each year. The year this data was collected, it was held in Pasadena, California. Access to conventions is limited by the expense of attending, which includes tickets (in the case of Comic-Con, the cost of attending the four-day convention runs \$175 per person, with tickets selling out nearly a year in advance; BotCon tickets cost \$20 per day with no shortage of walk-ins available at the door), travel, lodging, and meals, as well as any purchases made at the convention, itself.

Altogether, twenty-two participants were interviewed, a few individually, though most in groups of between two and seven. Potential interviewees were approached as they waited in line for various panel presentations, based on visual and/or auditory cues suggesting an interest in toys (including t-shirt graphics, conversations, and even toys-in-hand). Participants included convention attendees, a toy designer/vendor, and the author of a popular toy encyclopedia. The majority of participants were white, male, between twenty and forty years old, and from a middle class background. While this may ultimately also be the case for the larger community of adult toy fans, this selection is not, and is not intended to be, a representative sample, as this research was exploratory.

To allow for as organic a flow as possible and not to lead participants in their answers, the interviews were semi-structured, whereby they attempted to cover several core questions, but primarily allowed the "conversation" to flow however the participant directed. The questions used to guide the interview covered topics surrounding *which* toys were of interest to participants, *what* it was about the toys that drew in the participant, *where* the toys

fit into their lives, and *how* friends and family viewed this interest. These recorded interviews were then transcribed, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants in order to assure their anonymity.

Finally, content analysis was conducted, identifying recurring topics in the transcripts. Age, affect, aesthetics, fandom, and play emerged as prominent themes among participants. All portions of the interviews where the aforementioned topics came up were then extracted, and these references organized into conceptually relevant categories. Ultimately, I sought insight into the relevance of these themes to adult fans of toys and how they understand the meaning of these interests to their adult lives and incorporate them into their identities. These interviews were supported by information collected from a number of fan websites, interviews with adult toy fans featured in several recent documentaries, and panel presentations by industry members at San Diego Comic-Con 2011, BotCon 2011, and WonderCon Anaheim 2015.

Findings/Analysis

Part I: “Toys are for Kids”

Toys are marketed toward, and arguably intended for, children, and this reality is not lost on adult toy enthusiasts, who often summon “kids” in their discussions of their interest in toys. For some, this may be due to their own biographies involving toys. Ethan provided his history with toys (“I’ve been collecting *Star Wars* toys since I was a kid”), and further explained what he sees as his entrée into the world:

Well, my dad is a Star Wars fan, too, so I’ve been goin’ to science fiction conventions, with him, since I was a young boy, and a lot of those toys are just original from my childhood and even from before I was born, when he was collecting ’em, and stuff like that.

For others, the feelings/emotions these items evoke seem to be explainable only in the context of childlike wonder and enthusiasm. As Brad described,

Um, it’s the play. It’s the- like, it’s the excitement of being a kid, of opening up the toys, the excitement of being a kid, making up your own adventures. Not wanting to let that go. It keeps you young...

With most of us having grown up with toys of one kind or another, how and when did we halt our enthusiasm for plastic playthings? If as children, we all played with toys, and as adults, some of us do not, what is responsible for this change? If anything, it arguably makes more sense to return to a previous interest than it is to just move on/away completely from something once-beloved. For an explanation of this, however, one can look to the case of “Dark Ages.” Described among AFOLs (adult fans of Lego) and many other toy enthusiasts,

one's "Dark Ages" refer most often to the pre-teen or teen years, when toys (such as Lego) are retired from interest and/or usage. (This is perhaps particularly apropos nomenclature, given the association of cultural and intellectual retreat that characterizes the historical Dark Ages, which were then followed by the cultural reawakening and rebirth of the Enlightenment and Renaissance; in much the same way, toy enthusiasts treat their return to toys as a welcomed light at the end of what may have been a dark tunnel of adolescence.) Andrew, a contributor to The Brothers Brick (a Lego blog for adult fans of Lego), describes of his own experience:

Many LEGO fans go through a period called a "dark age" or "the dark ages" during which we don't buy LEGO or build anymore. Although I continued building at home during high school and college, I didn't buy a whole lot of LEGO between 1989 and 1997.²

As a teenager, with lots to prove, and in the midst of a major life course transition period, toys are the least appropriate interest to maintain. As a child, these items are expected in one's repertoire; as an adult, they're fun and whimsical, maybe even unexpected in a positive way; but as a teenager, it appears that the individual has failed to progress at the normal or expected rate. In other words, kids can play with toys, and adults, surrounded by the appropriate legitimizing language and activities, can also possess toys ("playing with them," however, is a story for another section...). But it is at least expected that the toys will be put away in the interim – and only resumed under the auspices of a legitimate, age-appropriate interest or activity once one is firmly established in adulthood. Why? Toys (and

² <http://www.brothers-brick.com/2006/06/04/brodys-col-du-mont-tower/>

often related, *play*) represent age-category-bound activities (Sacks 1992). When one is in a transition period, such as that between childhood and adolescence, or between adolescence and adulthood, s/he is vulnerable to being viewed as a member of that previous category (e.g., a child), leaving the individual inclined in many cases to abandon or at least suspend the activities. Later, once clear of this tenuous transition stage, it becomes safer to resume without the same risks to age category misidentification. (And a resumption in toy interest does (often) occur. Because resuming an activity is easier than starting a new one from scratch, there is a basis for a predisposition to resumption of said interest.) Other interests (especially those less category-bound to childhood than toys), however, will likely remain, much as Kyle described of his relationship with comics:

...but even when I quit collecting action figures for a while (when I w- my teenage years, so...), I still, y'know- still collected comics.

Still, despite their best efforts to connect their toy interests to childhood, and to discuss it in a context of childhood, adult toy fans nevertheless are unable to escape their very adult ways of approaching these objects, as will come to be seen. Certainly, in collecting toys, adults are engaging with a domain connected to their childhood, but their approaches to the hobby represent noticeably adult orientations – from organizing principles used to determine which items they'll collect, to moral evaluations rooted in how they display these collections. A tension is present in how one can be an adult who collects toys, while not giving up entirely on indulging self-preference and play. This dilemma – of an adult orientation to a children's product – is clear in collecting practices, most notably, the controlled exposure of the items (who gets to see or know about this hobby). It would be a mistake to simply view toy use as yet another nail in the coffin of contemporary American

adulthood as having become more childlike than in previous generations (see, for example, Côté 2000; Meyrowitz 1984), in light of these still-very-adult practices taking place in spite of the object's target age range.

Part II: Hey, Good-Lookin'...

Aesthetics

How do toys (objects designed to capture the interest of children) maintain their appeal to the refined palettes and mature sensibilities of adults? Aesthetics and affect seem to play the biggest roles in this draw. Here, aesthetics describe an appreciation for the material properties of the toy, itself, whereas affect covers more of what these objects evoke for the user – and may include factors such as nostalgia and/or fanship. Looking first to aesthetics, we see that an appreciation for toys can involve a variety of sensory reactions:

And I think a lot of that relates to toys, like tactile [elements] (Brad)

My eight-year-old's barometer for how good a toy is, is what it smells like when we open the package. Yeah, she's like, 'Oh, dad. That's good plastic.

This is a good toy, isn't it?' I'm like, 'Let me see. ((sniffs)) Oh, yeah. This is good stuff.' (Alex)

Alex's description of an olfactory evaluation of the quality of plastic (and therefore, toy) represents a developed sensitivity, not unlike the professional expertise of a wine enthusiast.

The aesthetic element that most stands out, however, is the visual side. Discussions of how cleanly, accurately, or artistically paint is applied to a figure (shorthand as the figure's

“paint app”), the amount of detail in the sculpting of a figure, the articulation (poseability, often dictated by the number of swivel-, hinge-, and ball-joints) held by a figure, how ‘artsy’ a given figure is, and the sheer ‘beauty’ possessed by a figure were present in nearly every interview.

I'll pick up a figure, the first time I'll see it, and I'll look at it, and I'll say,

'This has a bad paint app[lication].' So I'll buy it, but I won't open it.

Because if I find a better paint app, I'll take the other one back. (Alex)

I like...if it looks really...good. Not- I mean, not just like, 'Hey, that looks like

the character.' But if it's like- Even if it doesn't necessarily look like the

character depicted in the cartoon or whatever, if it looks interesting or

something. Like, y'know, if it's a bit artsy or something, then I would

definitely grab it. Like, stuff like that. (Jerry)

I'm a huge fan of the mold they've used for Drift and Blurr [Transformers

action figures]. Ah, that is a really, really nice toy. I'm a big fan of that sculpt,

man, it's just- it's so pretty. Such a gorgeous, gorgeous piece. (Edwin)

Um, just the sculpting. And, like, the work that they do. It's like, the whole-

just the variety of it. (Carlin)

For me, it's some of the artwork and the detail--and the process that it takes...

Especially...now that they can do everything digitally...they got that detail

really nice. (Derrick)

Yeah. It's ridiculous. I- That's why the toys cost so much money now- I can't

afford them, but... (Ethan)

Yeah, but- but it's worth it. (Derrick)

It's worth it! (Ethan)

'Cause they're so much better – better looking, and better quality. (Derrick)

The frequently-employed shorthand language reflects a knowledge of the production processes (paint apps, molds, etc.) behind the figures, which informs their collecting. This specialized form of knowledge about the toys they love demonstrates what Bourdieu refers to as “an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (1984:2). For, as Bourdieu holds, “[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (2). An appreciation for a well-sculpted figure, or one with cleanly-applied paint details is only (or most) available to those familiar with a range of sculpts and paint apps. These expertise-driven assessments represent an adult appreciation of these objects. Language describing the artwork, detail, mold, and sculpt of a “piece” further situates it as a ‘piece of art’ (Becker 2008).

Affect

When exploring what this interest and the activities associated therewith feels like to the adult, we can begin to uncover the *affective* element to an enjoyment of toys. This may provide “just a feeling,” as Ethan discussed in his elucidation of how he selects which toys to collect:

...I have to be really selective about what I want to get. Um... I mean, sometimes you just know- Exactly; you cannot buy everything. ...I dunno. I guess... it's somewhat an extension of me, and so I just feel it, y'know...

Or a simple (if not very descriptive) explanation (or perhaps more accurately, lack thereof):

I like what I like... (Derrick)

Harrington and Bielby uncovered similar ineffable desires among soap opera viewers, finding, “the pleasure can be so intense that it almost cannot be articulated by those experiencing it...to an extent often beyond their own comprehension” (1995:130). They offer an explanation, however, in that “[it] is in part pleasure’s complexity and multifocality that make it so difficult for fans and analysts to articulate. It is not just that different audiences receive different pleasures, but that individuals experience a range of pleasures” (130).

For many, though, this affective link can be attributed to establishing or maintaining connections. These connections may be to a faraway, fantastical world, one that in some way resonates with them:

I think it makes you feel more a part of that universe, or whatever. I mean, like, the ships you can sort of, see, or- I mean, not like, play with them or anything. You’re just like, ‘Oh, that’s ’sposed to be what Han Solo flew, and blah-blah-blah, and y’know, smuggled in this, or whatnot.’ (Ethan)

Usually I collect things with the shows that I watch, or, y’know, related to them. ...just things that I can relate to, in- y’know, shows that I have, uh, relationships with. (Harold)

Sentiments regarding being part of another universe, in particular, are not uncommon. As Brony Dustykatt (known as “the manliest Brony”) puts it, “I’m just a guy who happens to like a TV show. I love *My Little Pony*. I love what it does, I love the message it sends, and I

want to be a part of it, and I want to be able to play in that universe” (*A Brony Tale*, 2014). These echo the sentiments expressed in descriptions of getting lost in a book, or as Nell (1988) puts it, becoming “a temporary citizen of another world” (77).

This connection may also link the collector to other people; these may be figures in their immediate lives:

Uh, they just remind me of when I was a kid. Like, my dad and I had this sort of connection between GI Joes – he was in the military, and he used to love, like army- they didn’t have GI Joes when he was a kid, but, y’know. And he would just buy me just all these GI Joes, so... That was just the connection me and him had. And just brings back good memories. (Kyle)

...or comprise connections of “perceived intimacy” (Harrington & Bielby 1995:50), such as to actors (who may have played roles notable in the toy fan’s life):

And like you said, if you have a favorite actor, that’s used a favorite prop- - and you may want that...or something like that. (Derrick)

Nostalgia

These interpersonal connections sometimes provide the basis for nostalgia. Toys are used to reopen a past stage – something of a ‘remnant of their earlier self.’ But lived experience does not occur in discrete stages; instead, so-called ‘prior’ versions of the self all get incorporated into the ‘current’ self. Our experiences build upon one another, adding to a colorful mosaic of our present self which includes the very real elements of our pasts. Moving into another stage of life (childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood, and the like) doesn’t result

in some kind of magic ‘reset’ button being pressed. In other words, we are the sum of our experiences. Key aspects of our identities may be managed, with some features of ourselves brought to the fore, and others stashed away, minimized, or just saved for select audiences, but they don’t magically disappear. Toys provide laminations of time, connecting two of these perceived time periods or ages.

Much of this nostalgia, as is arguably built into the notion’s very definition, exists as a longing toward experiences, perhaps perceived to be tied solely and inseparably to childhood:

Um, it’s the play. It’s the- like, it’s the excitement of being a kid, of opening up the toys, the excitement of being a kid, making up your own adventures. Not wanting to let that go. It keeps you young, it keeps you young. (Brad)

For others, however, a toy may just elicit memories of a [particularly cherished] past time in their lives:

Mine is more like childhood memories, too... Like, little things that remind me of how I grew up. (Ingrid)

It often stems back to childhood, doesn’t it? It- It’s whatever you collected when you were a kid. And sometimes you forget about it, but then you come back to it. You go, ‘Oh yeah!’ I’ve had that! It’s a nostalgia thing. I mean, I think you get to a certain age, perhaps, and you sort of begin to look back at what you used to collect. Or you get- And you- you want to collect it all over again. (Martin, author of best-selling toy encyclopedia)

The place of nostalgia is not, however, limited just to what did happen in a person's past, but what could have happened, or what was somehow undone. In discussing the former, Fran explained:

I, myself, didn't have any [Transformers] toys as a child, because those were 'boy toys.' ...My older brothers got the toys. (Fran)

Her personal biography with Transformers toys (or perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof) opens up a space for nostalgia towards these particular toys, in a way creating or rewriting her history to include them. No, she can't go back in time and add them to her childhood, but she is certainly able to in adulthood (and now has an entire room dedicated to Transformers toys to prove it!). This 'better late than never' approach is a common sight among adults, who may visit Disneyland as an adult because they didn't as a child, or engage in other similar such experiences (epitomized in Michael Jackson's "Neverland Ranch"). This practice can be attributed at least in part to the emergence of a conception of childhood as a cultural experience with expectations, formed in real time in childhood or retrospectively in adulthood, that may not have been met. This represents a specifically adult way of thinking about childhood.

As far as the 'undoing' element of nostalgia is concerned, I turn to Brad, who casually used the term "spite-miss," a term he coined, to describe the feeling of regret associated with missing out on something. He and fellow interviewee Alex related their experiences with such:

...But it was Star Trek Micro Machines Set Three, that it was a beat-up box, and I just said, 'I'll wait until the next time I see it.' And I never saw it again.

I ended up having to get it on eBay. (Alex)

I have a lot of spite-miss. Like, things that I've- didn't get then, I just, I want it now. 'Cause I didn't get it then. (Brad, who went on to explain, at my urging):

Spite. Miss. Like, I'm spited, 'cause I missed it, y'know.

Other interviewees expressed this “spite-miss” (or a similar experience/feeling) toward the loss of their childhood toys through various means:

I always wished I'd kept my original toys- ...but you never- Who knew? And you never- and you never complained to mom or dad when they threw them away or gave them away. You didn't have a choice when you were nine.

(Derrick)

If you've- if you've got rid of it, you think, 'How could I have done that? I want them all back- I want that all back again! ...I used to collect things, and I don't know where they've gone. I don't remember the point when I said, 'Chuck it out!' I don't remember whether my mum or dad decided to chuck it out, whether I did... I just don't remember where it went. And I'd kind of love to have them back. (Martin, author of best-selling toy encyclopedia)

This ‘regret’ – or at least the desire (greater or smaller) to again have the opportunity to cherish/experience these objects, is a sentiment that appears to be shared by many. eBay is one example of a site very attuned to this phenomenon. As astutely referenced in *The Venture Bros*, an adult-oriented animated show:

I haven't seen one of those in years. (Dr. Venture)

Yep, a Rusty Venture lunchbox. It's not the one I had when I was a kid; this one I got on eBay. I can't use the Thermos because it smells like old milk. Plus some kid put Thundercats stickers all over it. (Billy)

The inclusion of this in the dialogue of the show suggests a ubiquity, in that viewers are expected to understand, if not personally relate to, the experience of retrieving some long-lost childhood artifact. It is not enough, as the above dialogue and indeed, countless eBay transactions likewise attest, to have the memory of a cherished object; this physical embodiment of our love possesses a power and importance above that which can be provided by mere mental abstractions.

Part III: Inside the Community

The practices associated with toy fandom happen within a special context: a community of like-minded collectors. Even if this appreciation is an interest that is more or less kept to oneself, in our highly interconnected world, everyone has at least a sense that others have similar affinities and practices. (The internet, with its countless pages, sites, and communities, is a reminder that there is no niche too small to have a community – and hold an online presence.) Even twenty years ago, Harrington and Bielby found that for soap opera fans, “the emergence and popularity of electronic bulletin boards both affords these fans access to one another and renders their play more publicly visible” (1995:152). But mostly, this *is* a social experience.

A key marker of these communities (as is the case with all communities) is the insider language shared by members of these groups. A specialized lexicon, covering basic aspects shared by most if not all toys (such as “Mint on Card”/”Mint in [Sealed] Box” (or “MOC”/”MIB/MISB”), to denote an item’s unopened/sealed status; “POA” (referring to the number of “Points of Articulation” possessed by a given toy); “wave” (a case assortment or series of case assortments that are shipped to stores at the same time); “custom” (a toy that is changed by the collector in some way from its mass market counterparts, either to improve the existing figure or make another character altogether); among other lingo), to more specialized terms (AFOL – an Adult Fan of Lego; “kibble” – the seemingly unnecessary parts adorning Transformers toys’ robot modes, but which are included because of their necessity to their alternate [car, dinosaur, etc.] modes; “fakie” – an unlicensed My Little Pony knock-off; “Chinasaur” – a specifically poor-quality dinosaur figure made in China), abound among adult appreciators of toys just as they do any other insider community. Part of this is born of practicality, as short-hand and specialized language develops over time for ease and speed of discussion, and part of this may be more attributable to celebrating the “insider-ness” (associated with insider knowledge) that contributes to the allure of a certain level of exclusivity.

More importantly to our examination, however, is what this language reveals about the communit(ies) of adult toy collectors. Beginning with perhaps the most widely used shorthand, surrounding the sealed status of a toy (mint on card/mint in box/mint in sealed box, etc., along with abbreviations MOC/MIB/MISB), an impression of expertise emerges, demonstrating, once again, the very adult orientations to the hobby. Further, however, we can see moral evaluations taking place, positioning specific practices (and by extension, persons

enacting these practices) as “good”/”right”/”more desirable” or “bad”/”wrong”/”less desirable.” This is clear even in mainstream media representations, as in the case of *Toy Story 2*, which positions the opening and playing with of toys (explicitly by children, at that) as the correct approach, and the keeping of toys in pristine, unopened condition (in the hands of an adult collector) as practically evil, as expressed by the character Buzz Lightyear, voiced by Tim Allen, in the following pieces of dialogue (*Toy Story 2*, 1999):

Woody, you're not a collectors' item, you're a child's plaything. You. Are. A toy!

...life's only worth living if you're being loved by a kid.

To do what, Woody? Watch children from behind glass, and never be loved again? Some life!

The adult toy collector in the film, Al, appears as enamored with the toys as Andy (the child who possesses the toys that make up the main characters of the film), displaying what appears to be a carefully cultivated collection spanning decades (fig. 1). Despite this, Al is the clear villain of the film, depicted as a jerk, a slovenly loser (falling asleep in front of the television, the bright orange residue of cheese puff snacks coating his mouth and fingers), and perhaps worst of all, someone who collects toys with the intention of reselling them to the highest bidder. Toy enthusiasts, whether they fall into the ‘let ‘em breathe’ or ‘keep ‘em sealed and pristine’ camp, most all agree that this category of toy acquirer (one who is “just in it for the money,” as Ginger put it) is despicable, and position themselves against this practice and collector type. (This is distinct from someone who may occasionally sell pieces of his or her collection because of fiscal needs; someone in it for the money is viewed as one

who approaches the hobby with this singular goal in mind, and cares not for non-monetary values of the objects.)



(Figure 1. Scene from *Toy Story 2*, displaying adult collector Al's collection of memorabilia from the fictional 'Woody's Roundup'; Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation, 1999.)

Another important function (or at least common usage) of specialized language is to serve as legitimizing language (and activities, which will be examined in the next section) associated with the use of toys by adults – individuals who, as mentioned above, must constantly provide evidence of their legitimate usage of these objects. This largely takes the form of classifications of collector types. Because collecting is an appropriate adult activity, no further explanation is needed; so by describing themselves as collectors – usually in the process of identifying the *type* of collector they classify themselves as – the need for further legitimization is often unnecessary. They may refer to themselves:

...I don't necessarily chase down, like, Star Wars, 'cause I'm not a Star Wars fan. For me, it's about the characters, and if I don't have a- if it's a unique

figure- a character that has never been made into a figure before, then I tend to do that. Or if there's a certain line, like, uh, the DC Universe Classics, I like that because it spreads out – there are comic books, so that way they can display together. (Alex)

With the He-Man line, I get it all. (Brad)

Or others:

...about two years ago, they did the whole rainbow Hal Jordan exclusive, where you get a different figure each day. And the figures aren't even- I mean, some of them never appeared in the comics, but there was such a mad dash to get these figures- where you had to have the set. And it's fascinating for me just to watch how people [seemed to say], 'Even though I don't necessarily need it, I've got to have it, 'cause I've got to have the set.' (Alex)

Or themselves in relation to others:

But I'm not one of those people that like, keeps them all in the plastic. So I'm not a- I'm not a good collector. I'm a 'me collector,' y'know? So I'm not gonna keep it all pristine in its little plastic box. I wanna take it out, and play with the accessories, and.... I mean, you want to switch out the little things that they're carrying, or make it like a little tableau. I don't want him just sitting there in plastic, like not doing anything. That's not any fun. For me. (Ginger)

In these accounts, collectors discuss everything from their own rationale (“‘cause I’m not a Star Wars fan”) to the perceived ludicrousness of ‘those *other* collectors’ (““Even though I don’t necessarily need it, I’ve got to have it, ‘cause I’ve got to have the set””) to evaluations of themselves in relation to the collecting habits of others (“I’m not a good collector. I’m a ‘me collector””). And in doing so, they establish, as a given in the discussion, that what they’re doing (collecting) is an acceptable adult activity. Deeper, some of these references separate the experts and fans from ‘mere consumers,’ suggesting another moral distinction between those who exert agency over the objects they’re consuming, and those who merely consume whatever product the company sets before them. This echoes the “traveler” versus “tourist” distinction set forth by Boorstin (1962). Again, these represent a uniquely adult orientation, which spans expertise, taste, and even moral evaluations: “their judgments make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis” (Bourdieu 1984:5).

Part IV: So, What Do They *Do* with the Toys?

Collecting

Because toys are viewed as a child’s domain, an adult appreciation of these objects must be explained, even rationalized. One such ‘accountable’ way for adults to use toys is through a professional relationship with the items. Toy enthusiasts may maintain or contribute to blogs devoted to a toy of interest and which may focus on a particular franchise of interest and include toys among other representations, such as comics, films, television, and other media and merchandise; create and publish video reviews of toys on YouTube; or resell toys in their

original form, or modified through a process known to the community as “customization”, among other such outlets. Fans may alternately, or additionally, legitimize their use of these objects through children, whereby the toys are accrued for personal enjoyment, but with the stated goal of giving to, or sharing with, children – their own, including potential future children, nieces and nephews, their grandchildren, friends’ children, the neighbor’s kid, or otherwise. Kyle explained his possession of toys:

...when my nephews come over, we’ll play, like, ‘Spider-Man’ or something...and once my kid’s born, I mean, we’re gonna play, so....

In these situations, toy enthusiasts are calling upon the adult activity of childcare as an outlet through which they may play with the toys. This is yet another example of the ways a children’s object can be used in an adult way: through an adult activity (such as childcare), as well as the very orientation to toy use as being one with an ultimate goal or rationality (something that children playing with toys do not conjure); the mere fact that so many respondents suggest some kind of secondary, acceptable purpose demonstrates adults’ orientation to the activity as a transgression, in need of explanation.

Collecting, as an age-appropriate activity, provides a ready-made rationale for engagement with these otherwise-forbidden objects. But the story doesn’t stop there; in fact, collecting tends to not be an end in its own right, but is instead utilized more as a first step to another activity involving the objects (‘using’ them, as explored below). This is far from a singular type of activity, however. Toy enthusiasts employ a variety of approaches to collecting, engaging in different strategies for determining what specific toys (from type, to

theme, to individual pieces) they will collect, and by extension, what kind of collector they identify themselves (and others) to be.

Deciding what to collect doesn't often begin as an intentional effort, but comes about as the result of an interest, that gradually grows into the accumulation of these objects. While many children are familiar with toys in childhood, interviewees discussed their introduction to the idea of adult interest in toys either as children (*Star Wars* figures handed down from a parent, attending conventions as a child, etc.) or in adulthood (Ginger's love for Transformers figures was in place in childhood, but it wasn't until adulthood that she was able to nurture this interest with her own collection). But outside of these more general interests are the more specialized decisions: Does a collector attempt to collect all toys of a given franchise?

With the He-Man line, I get it all. (Brad)

...only a certain line? ...a certain character (for example, just the Michelangelo figures, rather than all Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles)? ...or use other individualized, often deeply personal classifiers to determine which objects are welcomed into a collection?

If- if the toy in general is really cool, sometimes I'll get it. But for the most part, it's characters that I like. (Fred)

For me, it's about the characters, and if I don't have a- if it's a unique figure- a character that has never been made into a figure before, then I tend to do that. Or if there's a certain line, like, uh, the DC Universe Classics, I like that because it spreads out – there are comic books, so that way they can display together. (Alex)

This may be especially true when space and money are in limited supply, as will come to be seen:

Unfortunately for me, it's money, honestly. I- They are so expensive now, with the details, and just how amazing they are, that I have to be really selective about what I want to get. (Ethan)

They're all pretty much in storage currently, but I, um, I used- Yeah, I don't have the room. Um, I- I have sold some. Just, once again, for spatial reasons – moving, and stuff like that, or needing money. (Fred)

From these very personal decisions come evaluations and labels of what kind of collector one identifies as (and identifies others as). Some collectors take up a ‘completionist’ approach, whereby they set out to accumulate all of something – all *Star Wars* action figures, all Hot Wheels cars, all My Little Ponies. In light of some toys’ staying power over the years, however (GI Joe, *Star Wars*, and Transformers toys have had a near-constant marketplace presence since the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, respectively), this is often not a feasible venture. (As mentioned above, spatial and monetary limitations are here a key consideration.) Others may employ a ‘selective’ approach to collecting, using individually-determined rationale (based on tastes or needs) to select which lines, characters, or styles to pursue. In this instance, one may choose to collect only Luke Skywalker figures, rather than attempt to acquire all *Star Wars* figures, ever, or choose only those figures from *The Empire Strikes Back*. This may reflect a favorite or preferred character, film, or other individualized expression of taste, and contributes to a personalized expression of identity. Still other collectors utilize a more ‘piecemeal’ undertaking, selecting whatever pieces catch their eye,

and not employing a more concrete guideline as is the case with completionist and selective approaches, where collectors maintain ‘rules’ guiding their collecting practices.

Other than that, it’s pretty sporadic. Hulk here and there, Hulk villains.

Things that are cool. Like, I’m gonna- I’m gonna get that Gizmo that I was telling you about earlier. But I don’t collect Gremlins. And I’m really not a huge Gremlins fan. It just looks kinda fun. (Brad)

I- I like what I like, and if I can buy it, I buy it. I’m not necessarily a collector of one thing. (Derrick)

...when I’d see one that I liked, I would get it. So, I have a Captain Crunch figure, I have, um, I have a slave girl Leia, I have Venture Brothers – just, things that I like. (Fred)

Importantly, via these collector identities, agency is enacted; they don’t *have* to get every *Star Wars* figure or even every Luke Skywalker figure. Whichever ones they choose to bring home and into their lives comes down to the enactment of their own choice – the imposition of their free will on an otherwise mass-marketed object, where a corporation calls the shots.

Related to these demarcations of ‘types of collectors’ and what they collect, is the decision of whether the collector will remove the toy from its packaging, or leave it sealed. ‘To open or not to open’ places collectors into opposing camps, with toy enthusiasts maintaining strongly-held beliefs/stances on the subject:

You gotta open. (Jerry)

I usually try to leave it in the package. There's some toys I just gotta break 'em out and play with 'em. Like I got Gizmo over there from Neca. So he's comin' out the package. I wanna- I wanna play with him. I wanna put the glasses on, give him his little Comic-Con bag, and be cool about it, y'know.

(Steve)

I open most of my collection. I've got it all displayed out, yeah. (Kyle)

When I first started, I opened a few, and I was like, 'Dammit!' (Fred, expressing remorse over having opened toys in the past)

Packaging, as an artifact of production, presents for some a key component of a toy's aesthetic value, while for others, it is simply packaging – a vessel for transportation, and little more.

I like the packaging. Like, most of my Star Wars- the packaging- I really like the way they look on-package, so I keep those mainly on card. (Kyle)

This also results in self- and other-classification:

But I'm not one of those people that like, keeps them all in the plastic. So I'm not a- I'm not a good collector. I'm a 'me collector,' y'know? So I'm not gonna keep it all pristine in its little plastic box. I wanna take it out, and play with the accessories. (Ginger)

(One exchange in a group interview went as follows):

I open 'em. Definitely. It's- it's more personal to open them, instead of keeping them in the box. 'Cause that's not what they're for. (Harold)

Yeah, I'm not a collector, so I like to enjoy them. (Ingrid)

Well, a collector is like- I would consider myself a collector even though I'm opening them. But I'm not- (Jerry)

You're just not in it for the money (Ginger)

Yeah. I'm not in it for resale- or anything like that. I'm in it for myself. (Jerry)

But besides people holding strongly to one side or the other as far as personal practices go, this doesn't appear to provide any interpersonal conflict. Toy enthusiasts recognize that their practices are not shared by all others, and treat these other approaches as legitimate alternatives, even summoning the practice of "dealing" (collecting the toys with the intent to sell on the secondary market for a profit) as a despicable practice against which to rally (a unifying, mutual denouncement), as in the above case. In Ginger's above quote, she demonstrates recognition that her particular orientation to this question isn't in keeping with everyone else's, and reasserts, with an added, "For me," that this is a practice that fits her (but implicitly asserting that not everyone will share this). In doing so, she avoids the potential for alienating others in the interview group who may keep figures sealed.

Display

As mentioned above, however, it is often not enough to just accumulate these objects. Many interviewees described toys in storage as 'awaiting display' – often because of spatial constraints:

I'm fortunate to live in my own home, so- so I have enough space. I'm running out... ((all laugh)) ..but I have enough space to kinda, put what I want,

y'know, and have what I want, what I like. Whatever else is in storage, but eventually it'll have a place. (Derrick)

Uh, I have a few things on display around my house- but, I, uh, have not yet set up, like a wall of toys or anything yet. I- that is coming soon, probably--but right now, I just have things kind of around the house, set up. (Ethan)

They're all pretty much in storage currently, but I, um, I used- Yeah, I don't have the room. (Fred)

These accounts suggest an orientation to purchasing and possessing toys as not an end in itself; toys in storage are in limbo, awaiting more permanent homes on shelves, in display cases, or even occupying entire dedicated rooms. Display, then, provides the expected next step to the legitimate activity of collecting. Collecting (procuring these treasured objects), by virtue of what it is, requires something be done with the fruits of the hunt; displaying is an acceptably adult means of putting them to use. And while the toys could simply be packed away, the collecting an end in itself, this is notably rejected by collectors as a desirable possibility. This activity is deeply and thoroughly entrenched in the toy collector's everyday life, as can be seen in the variety of spaces that are utilized for display:

I mean, the stuff that I- that I had displayed out for a long time, I put away, and the new stuff kinda cycles through. I'll display like, at my work – at my office – and at home. Things like that. (Jerry)

Um, mostly display. But I take 'em down, and I've got displays in my classroom, and I have displays in my home. (Brad)

... it's nice to have something that you can hang on the wall, or showcase. In your home. (Derrick)

These displays are treated as part of one's identity, put up, in some cases, everywhere the person goes – or at least spends most of their time (home and work). For others, access may be intentionally more restricted (as explored below). Again, these point to the moral stances around the use and display of these objects (display, as the correct follow-up to acquisition, and packing the items away, as the undesirable (albeit sometimes necessary, if only temporarily) next step).

Further, there is a social element inherent in display. Displaying them allows the collector to spend time with the objects in a purposeful way that makes them available to others. The internet takes this social element one step further; rather than displays being limited to home and work spaces (whereby the potential audience is fairly limited), the internet opens up the possibility of display to a virtually limitless audience. Blogs and specialty sites provide a space where specific toys or entire collections can be viewed and appreciated by countless others. Displaying offers an additional function: the opportunity for encouraging engagement with others, including passing on knowledge and appreciation for the toy, character, and/or franchise:

This is my man-cave in my basement. I set up various displays. And my kids and I play down there together, so we open up the toys together, and we take stuff out, and put 'em up, and... (Alex)

I, you know, I have friends who are interested in this stuff but aren't necessarily collectors. So they- they know kinda what fandom is. Or

appreciate the fact that you're collecting, or again, when- when someone doesn't know what it is, and you can display it in your home, they'll be more interested in, I think, it hanging on a wall than, y'know, 'Oh, let me show you this box of stuff that I have-' Y'know, that's all part of the display – is in informing people about what it is, and wh- how they made it – whatever knowledge, you have, to give them, then they can say, 'Oh, cool.' y'know...

(Derrick)

Above, Alex describes display as a medium through which he and his children share the joy of the toys, providing them a shared activity and passion. Derrick, meanwhile, evokes a secondary purpose to this hobby, whereby his displays provide an access point to share knowledge about a given toy with others.

Display also carries with it the ability to control exposure over who sees what and when. In the film, *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*, main character Andy is convinced by his friends that prior to his girlfriend coming over to his apartment for the first time, he needs to hide away all of his toys:

Look at this place, man. ...What is she gonna think when she walks in here? 'Oh look, he's got a billion toys.' ...Okay, we just take everything that's embarrassing, and we move it out of here so it doesn't look like you live in Neverland Ranch (The 40-Year-Old Virgin, 2005).

The possibility of determining the visibility of a display was present in several accounts, offering the potential to manage one's identity presentation:

I pack 'em away if I don't want someone to see 'em. ((several laugh)) If there's someone coming over, and I want to make an impression on 'em...

(Harold)

Yeah, like a shelf. Like a back- a back room, y'know, little shrine kind of shelf kind of thing. (Ginger)

Not all toy enthusiasts are content with this fairly passive end to their collecting, however; there are instances when display blurs the line between static appreciation and more active 'play,' as display can indeed include playful elements:

One of my favorites is- I have a Michael Madsen from, uh, Reservoir Dogs, and- and he's got all his little accoutrements, so he's got a little razor and a spare ear, and a pop thing, and a gun, and all of a sudden you want to switch those out and move 'em. And when I bought it from this- this video place that was going out of business, they had this- gotten a Ken doll, and made it up like the cop – so he's all bound up, and he's got tape around his mouth. So they're posed together, so I can, like, y'know, torture the cop, and, like, cut off his ear. ... (Ginger, describing her display reenacting a famous scene from the film)

Here, Ginger provides the clearest case of the blend of adult and child: In one sense, she's quite clearly playing in a fantasy scenario, in very much the same manner children engage in such, with the important distinction that this particular fantasy scenario is about a police officer being tortured. In other words, it is a childlike form of play (a fantasy situation,

making things up, using the toys to recreate a scene from a film), but the content of this particular imaginative play is fundamentally adult.

Moreover, adult fans of toys make a point to differentiate their “play” (enjoyment of toys) from the kind of play that is expected to be engaged in by children. This “kid play” is referred to in pejorative ways, dismissed as an activity that ‘of course’ would not be engaged in by an adult. Sentiments such as “I don’t sit there and take He-Man through a really rough day or anything” (as made by Brad) were common, and often followed by offers of the adult means they employ in their enjoyment of toys. Brad provided this in a rather explicit way: “...the adult part to it – is being fascinated with the process of how the toy gets made.” (This extra effort need not even be made, however; the activities they engage in with toys are in many ways noticeably very ‘adult,’ arguably sharply distinct from the things young children do with toys and the way they orient to them.) After describing his sincere, emotional connection to toys, Ethan interrupted himself to interject that he doesn’t engage in kid play, presenting a harshly denouncing, pejorative stance towards the notion of “playing with something”:

I think it makes you feel more a part of that universe, or whatever. I mean, like, the ships you can sort of, see, or- I mean, not like, play with them or anything. You’re just like, ‘Oh, that’s ’sposed to be what Han Solo flew, and blah-blah-blah, and ya’ know, smuggled in this, or whatnot.’

It does appear that narratives are acceptable in their enjoyment of the objects. Here, Ethan refers to displaying the Millennium Falcon, the ship that character Han Solo famously flew in *Star Wars*, and more specifically refers to the character’s activities (smuggling) with the ship.

In other words, elements not materially present in the model (the character Han Solo, the activities he engaged in while flying the ship) are evoked as appreciations for what this object more largely represents. He describes a relationship with the toy ship that very much resonates with his earnest testimony that these items make the possessor “feel more a part of that universe.” However, what would not be acceptable is for the user to “play with them or anything.” (It should be noted, however, that this takes on a more ambiguous role within the AFOL (“adult fan of Lego”) community, among whom the term “swooshable” (a “quality that allows a LEGO creation to be picked up and flown around a room as the builder makes flying noises”³) denotes the acceptability of this act.)

With “swooshing” and other forms of these pejorative denouncements of “play” out of the question for most, what acceptable forms of adult interaction with toys are left? Creative pursuits, such as customizing a toy or photographing it in a clever way, or in a way that suggests a narrative, provide acceptable adult engagements with these items intended for the infantile set. “Customizing” (figs. 2-3) involves making alterations to a toy in order to make it fit to the user’s vision – more detailed paint, increased articulation, alterations in sculpting, and other adjustments that may entail anywhere from a few minutes of minor work to hundreds of hours of artistry. This may be done to improve upon a commercially available figure, or to create one that hasn’t been commercially produced. Here, collecting may provide merely the materials for another activity (artistic creations that may be kept or sold/given away), or it may supplement collecting (as in the case of figures that aren’t produced or aren’t produced ‘well’). Toy photography (figs. 4-5) likewise can involve as much or as little time and attention as available or desired by the user. Many Flickr users

³ <http://www.brothers-brick.com/lego-glossary/>

participate in “photo a day” groups, posting one photo every day featuring a toy. A Lego Minifigure may be investigating a bowl of cereal, an action figure may be scaling a throw pillow, or a stuffed animal may be posing in front of the Eiffel Tower. These may consist of a more or less explicit narrative, may involve simply creative poses or locales, or any number of other situations in which a photo of a toy represents a creative product by the user. And these are just two examples of the near-infinite number of creative engagements of toys.



Figure 2. Custom Labbit vinyl toys, by Motorbot.



Figure 3. "My Little Slave Princess Leia" custom My Little Pony, by Mari Kasurinen.



Figure 4. “The Signs of Spring” photo, by Avanaut



Figure 5. “Breaking in the Tauntaun” photo, by Avanaut.

But for all the denouncements of “play” and attempts to separate adult activities involving toys from those engaged in by children, is there really all that much of a difference? Sure, kids aren’t making ironic social commentary with photo novels of their toys – but not all adults are, either. And many that are producing photo novels (for example) are really just creating narratives. Yes, they may be more mature or sophisticated themes and storylines than those produced by children, but that’s a difference of degree, not kind. And there are plenty of kids out there creating narratives that they’re sharing over the internet via stop-motion videos on YouTube, and photos of toys that have been customized to meet their needs. Adults may have greater access to resources (the credit cards and driver’s licenses needed to procure supplies in many cases), but when it comes down to it, most resources (time, money, and space, among them) represent as many potential differences within each of these groups (adults and kids) as between.

What each of these activities reflects is agency. For much of human history, we were active participants in the culture of which we were a part. Rather than sitting around a radio or television and passively listening and watching, we played music and sang with each other. We weren’t just listening to stories – we were the ones doing the storytelling. Then in the twentieth century, with the rise of cinema, radio, and television, this role became one of more passive consumption. But over the past few decades, there has been something of a resurgence of active consumers – most notably involving video games. The fact that electronic gaming revenues now surpass those of film (Chatfield 2011) suggests a growing desire by consumers to take on a more active involvement in their entertainment. Toys fit this new category, enabling users to own, touch, and manipulate the characters from stories they’ve experienced in comics, film, television, and otherwise.

I think it makes you feel more a part of that universe... (Ethan)

I mean, like, the ships you can sort of, see, like, 'Oh, that's 'sposed to be what

Han Solo flew (Ethan)

*...things that I can relate to, in- y'know, shows that I have, uh, relationships
with (Harold)*

Here, people are not simply staring at a screen; they're swooshing and posing and repainting. This range of choice represents a continuum, from selecting what to buy, to deciding if and how to display one's collection, to the very-active activities of customization and other forms of adult play. People are no longer content to simply sit back and watch something; they want to own parts of it to incorporate into their lives. (This has of course not gone unnoticed by the culture industry, as illustrated by the *Breaking Bad* figures recently added to (albeit quickly removed from) toy store shelves.)

Part V: What Do the Toys Do for Them?

Toys provide a basis for and demonstration of identities. Sutton-Smith argues that toys "become thoroughly absorbed into one's social character and self" (214). This is [easily] seen in identity formation:

*...they're stuff that I remember...um, y'know, from my childhood or- or
further on –stuff I just really liked a lot. (Steve)*

I grew up with him, and that was like one of my heroes – that’s like, one of the role models of my life. Like, I was like three to four years old... Y’know, it’s Optimus Prime. He was the man. He’s the best. (Edwin)

As well as identity presentation:

I’ll display like, at my work – at my office – and at home. (Jerry)

This may not always be a sought-after or intentional expression of identity. Bronies, adult (and often male) fans of *My Little Pony*, are a particularly viciously-targeted fan base. Assumptions surrounding perceived femininity, homosexuality, pedophilia, “sexual deviance,” social awkwardness, and more follow Bronies in mainstream media and popular thought (*Bronies*, 2012). In recounting his experiences, one Brony describes having his rear windshield smashed by tire irons and baseball bats, followed by a rifle pointed at his face, for applying *My Little Pony* decals to his car (*Bronies*, 2012). In this case, the usual transgression of an adult playing with toys (perhaps viewed as pitiful or pathetic; maybe someone to feel sorry for) is upgraded to that of a male appreciating pink ponies (in this instance, pointing to someone apparently in need of threats of violence and terrorization). While this may be an extreme example, the point is that while a Brony (or other toy collector) may embrace the identity of a particular fanship, the larger climate often applies its own understanding of what this identity represents. Lauren Faust, creator of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (the television series that launched the current pony craze), suggests a potentially more optimistic note:

My Little Pony might be opening some people's minds about what is acceptable behavior in men, and what it means to be a man, and whether or not being sensitive, and being caring is part of being a man. (Bronies, 2012)

Like gender, socio-economic status sneaks into view via the collecting practices of adult toy fans. On the one hand, the position of toys as part of Jenkins's "democratic arts," accessible to everyone, means anyone can collect toys (limited perhaps by type and quantity). But this belies the reality that even if one or a few pieces at ten dollars each may be attainable for most, keeping up with the dozens or hundreds of figures quickly becomes a significant investment of money, space, and even time. (And that's not including inflated secondary market prices for hard to find items, or items that simply enter the retail market at a higher price.) Certainly, the initial cost of a figure is a consideration, but once the figure is in a collector's possession, it needs to be stored or displayed, whether in mom's attic or a dedicated room (with all the class requirements that these presuppose). Further, to get one's hands on an in-demand figure, one's best chances may be to wait outside of a toy or big box store prior to opening following a delivery day (or, for the bold – and those with the disposable income to support it – accounts exist of coffee and donut bribes to store managers and employees in exchange for the first look inside a shipment). (Delivery days often take place on weekdays, leaving this practice of course to only those who are able to skip work on a given Thursday morning, for example.) All of these considerations (initial cost, storage space, and the resources necessitated by 'the hunt') require ultimately economic investments that just aren't available to everyone. Prohibitive (or at least, restrictive) costs came up in a number of interviews ("I can't afford them," "I have to be really selective about what I get,"

“Unfortunately for me, it’s money, honestly....They are so expensive now,” “I’m fortunate to live in my own home, so- so I have enough space”).

Second, toys provide a means of fostering relationships with loved ones and other toy fans. They offer a medium through which family or friends can interact, and provide a basis for relationships with individuals with similar interests. Alex described playing with his children in his “man cave,” remarking, “it’s fun for us. It’s kind of a togetherness, father-daughter kind of thing.” People from all over a given state, country, and the world converse on toy-centric forums, share news and reviews on fan sites, and occasionally get the opportunity to meet up at conventions. But even without these direct forms of connection, toys allow for Huizinga’s (1970) notion of existing “apart together” – that through this shared sense of community (and related feelings of specialness and secrecy/insiderness), people can share this connection to others who ‘get it.’ Just knowing that there are others out there who express the same love of 25th Anniversary Croc Master, experience the same frustration over a lack of human figures in the *Jurassic World* line, and employ the same building techniques of Lego castles, creates a community that transcends time and space, and provides, even to an otherwise-isolated Brony, a fandom family.

Third, these objects inspire creativity and play. And engaging in such is more acceptable (even encouraged) than ever, in light of the proliferation of online communities:

And now there’s just a bigger exposure, with the internet, and all your social networking, that actually involves everybody that collects. So nobody feels isolated anymore, like, ‘I don’t feel like a geek ’cause I collect toys.’

Everybody's more open to it – and it's more cool to be like that! (Steve, toy designer and vendor)

Play allows for a breaking away from everyday life. Much like with a book, the consumer is invited to go live in another world for a while. And much like the offer of escape from isolation promised or provided by social networking, it offers a fantasy version of this. The trouble comes when “fantasy itself is ridiculed, and fantasizers are often derided for spending time doing ‘unimportant’ things,” yet “[fantasy] neither compensates for empty lives nor provides temporary flight from them but rather adds a crucial dimension to life in providing a setting for desire” (Harrington & Bielby 1995:124-125). And whereas for children, it may be fairly easy to fantasize abstractly, perhaps as adults, encumbered by the many harsh facets of reality, we need something ‘real’ (an object, a *toy*) to facilitate our journey to this otherwise intangible realm. In that sense, toys if anything become more necessary to adults – at least as far as maintaining play in one’s life.

Discussion

Change is in the air. While the notion of “adult toys” still likely brings to mind a very specific kind of product (one not stamped with Hasbro, Mattel, or Lego monikers), mainstream media depictions have shown us that the idea of adults coveting, possessing, and utilizing “toys” (the playthings originally intended for, and so often associated with, children) is a broadly recognizable phenomenon. Industry has likewise taken notice, with toy producers manufacturing figures marketed specifically to adult audiences, and major chains setting aside shelf space for these offerings. Still, there remains a tension in the practices of toy acquisition by adults, who must find acceptable ways to explain and validate this interest.

This is apparent in everything from the social structures that do not yet allow a place for toy consumption by adults, to toy fans' conceptualization of the objects, and the ways they incorporate them into their lives.

This study, though exploratory, utilizes Gary Fine's "micro- or meso-level" approach, to examine the material properties, discourses, and actions surrounding toy use by adults, to elucidate this growing population of toy enthusiasts, and complicate existing notions of who it is that consumes toys, as well as the idea that adults and children play differently. As the above can attest, adults represent a very real user base for toys. And while one may be quick to assert that their interest and use of these objects must constitute a style distinct from that of children, the reality is more complex. This is seen in the ways adults find themselves attracted to the toys in the first place, which represents a continuum of adult and childlike sensibilities: from the Bourdieuan notions of taste and hierarchy found in respondents' descriptions of the aesthetic properties of toys, to the more childlike expressions surrounding affective appreciations of these objects. Further, this is also seen in the ways adults interact with toys. Donald Winnicott made the vital assertion that play is not just important for kids – and few would likely disagree – but what we see here is that these objects even provide many of the same roles in adult lives. Insider communities are formed around a shared interest in toys, impacting everything from what language is used, to what websites are visited, to what material constitutes fodder for memes and jokes.

Key also in an examination of the ways toy use is similar among both adults and children is the employment of significant agency in the way these objects are integrated into users' lives. Toy enthusiasts may be first attracted to a toy's physical properties, but it is what they do with them, how they think of them, and how they integrate them into their lives that

appears to be the true source of joy for their possessors. These meanings are shaped by previous experiences, and vary not only between individual users, but within any given user across time. This is the connection between adult and child use of toys. Rather than encompassing a singular, static activity, toy collection changes as collectors change – understandable, given that so much of the pleasure and meaning derived from these objects is a result of the ways users approach them (something that likewise is going to change over time). A toy one may have “taken through a really rough day” in the backyard during childhood may in adolescence (during one’s “Dark Ages”) be packed away out of sight, and in adulthood, carefully displayed in a case, protected from dust and harmful UV rays. The object hasn’t physically altered (save perhaps for some battle scars from less-than-gentle play in childhood), but the user has, incorporating new experiences into both the ways they approach these beloved objects and what the objects mean to them. A vehicle for recreating a favorite movie scene at eight-years-old may represent for the *thirty-eight-year-old* a cherished past or a reminder of how a love of dinosaurs resulted in a career path in paleontology.

The notable difference in the way adults incorporate toys into their lives is the presence of textual imperatives. Whereas children are under no pressure to provide a rationale for their play with toys (indeed, they’re expected to play with toys – a reality to which child and adult alike will attest), adults feel a need to provide an explanation for their possession, use, and even interest in toys. What can be a carefree, pure enjoyment in childhood, becomes a guilty pleasure in adulthood – one marked by a perceived need for legitimizing language and activities. Perhaps the greatest gift toys provide their fans is the reminder *to play*, and all that entails:

Nobody wants a world in which children never reach maturity, a kind of 'never-never land' where one can act infantile forever. The socialization process is essential for human accomplishment and fulfillment. But we must be cautious that in furthering the development of our children, we do not push too hard toward the rationalization of all experience, destroying within them those qualities that make them most human: their capacity to play, to find pleasure, to be creative (Jenkins 2007:184).

We mustn't, however, limit this concern for the preservation of play to children. Let us play, exploring creativity and whimsy, and allowing ourselves the unfettered joy we so often view as belonging solely to the brief period of time characterized by childhood.

Strengths & Limitations

This study represents an initial foray into the largely misrepresented (and understudied) subject of adult appreciators of toys. With this exploratory study having been conducted, much more thorough investigations can examine more of the nuances of adult toy play, collecting, and other activities. AFOLs (adult fans of Lego), for example, represent a community that may be quite distinctive from that of Transformers fans, who may be likewise notably different from Hot Wheels collectors – as far as practices, composition, and otherwise. Additionally, any broader study of adult toy fans (whether addressing these nuances or not) can shed more light on this subculture, from demographics to the larger institutional structures at work.

It should be restated that the sample presented in the interviews does not (and was not intended to) comprise a representative sample of adult toy fans. It should also be noted that I am a toy collector and customizer myself, and that while I have employed my sociological training in ethnographic research and conversation analysis with the intent of as objective a position as possible, this background subjective experience is impossible to erase completely, and may leave some mark, however small, on the final product. More importantly, the interview process itself (comprised of questions regarding toy consumption) positions respondents in the situation of explaining (for some, perhaps even defending) their out-of-bounds usage of these traditionally child-oriented objects. While some mitigation of these effects may be possible with language modification of the interviews (and/or any surveys), however, this may be a limitation more broadly of the research question itself. Even accounting for this potential limitation, however, the insight into this unexplored realm provides at the least, an entrée into a new site for study.

Concluding Remarks

The relevance of using conversation analytic work to inform ethnographic research is here demonstrated. The two approaches to social research do not often cross paths, but as illustrated in the preceding pages, the closer attention of conversation analysis provides more meticulous insight into the subtext present in respondents' accounts, providing a more thorough examination of social processes at work. This expands on Harvey Sacks's (1992) work on Membership Categorization Device, and such work as Elizabeth Stokoe's (2006) work on the ongoing production and realization of social facts and their created realities.

When Johan Huizinga wrote about play forty-five years ago, adult play and kid play were characterized as distinct enterprises. Today we can see how these activities and approaches appear more on a continuum, with differences between adult and child use representing differences of degree, rather than kind. Adults, with arguably greater access and autonomy (from credit cards and cars, to a lack of parental authority determining what toys can be brought home), and more experience and education (via the simple reason of having existed for a longer period of time), may provide more articulate or sophisticated expressions of their interests, but that's the primary difference between adult and child users: the perceived need for an explanation in the first place. Future research on the subject of play (generally) and of toys (specifically), therefore, should approach these topics across a number of age ranges, rather than inorganically separating those of children and of adults. Only then can a clearer picture be possible of this continuum of play across the life cycle, and how toys fit into this model.

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